



## The Metamorphosis of the World: Society in Pupation?

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Abstract:	<p>This article focuses on The Metamorphosis of the World (2016), which transpired to be the final academic contribution made by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck. The central aspects of the process of metamorphosis are appraised and the theoretical approach adopted by Beck is considered within the broader context of his oeuvre. At an analytical level, continuities with previous work are illuminated and novel conceptual developments identified. In order to provide a systematic evaluation of the theory of metamorphosis, both Beck's epistemological position and his modus operandi are subjected to scrutiny. Despite evident elisions, it is argued that the theory of metamorphosis breaks new ground in social theory and offers valuable opportunities for both conceptual debate and future empirical investigation.</p>

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**Introduction**

On New Year’s Day 2015 Ulrich Beck passed away suddenly, having suffering a heart attack. He had, characteristically, been taking a stroll with his wife Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim in the *Englische Garten* in Munich, animatedly discussing the contents of the book he was close to completing. *The Metamorphosis of the World* (TMOTW) was to be the first of a planned trilogy. In the opening book Beck’s intention had been to map out the key principles and foundational concepts that supported the new theory he had long been ruminating on. He was excited and restive about this venture, which represented both a harmonization of the underlying processes he had spent years defining and a step change in his thinking about social change. For Beck, TMOTW was to be considered as ‘an attempt to answer a plausible answer to the urgent question: ‘What is the meaning of the global events unfolding before our eyes?’ (Beck, 2016: 4). He had provisionally sketched out the parameters of the theory of metamorphosis in a journal article published in *Current Sociology* (Beck, 2015a) and these parameters were to be fully developed in the forthcoming book. Having been somewhat exercised by aspects of his previous work being lost in translation, this was to be the first book Ulrich would write directly in English. He had thus been especially keen to gain feedback on a first draft and - aside from the reviews commissioned by the publishing house - had solicited comments from trusted colleagues. Sadly, he was to work no further on the book and, following on from the many commemorations and gatherings to celebrate his life and work, the decision was made to fill the gaps that remained in various chapters to render the book suitable for publication. This enterprise was undertaken by Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, John Thompson and Albert Gröber, working in consultation with a group of researchers

from Ulrich's inner circle, including Sabine Selchow and Anders Blok. In many respects, TMOTW serves as a continuation of Beck's enduring mission to illumine what he saw as the society-shaping forces of the epoch. Having worked at the cutting edge of sociological inquiries in the 1990s into the pervasive effects of risk and individualization (Beck, 1992, 1995; 1999), in the new millennium he turned his attention to the ways in which these processes intersected with the evolving dynamics of globalization and cosmopolitanization (Beck, 2000; 2006; 2009). Having made theoretical headway in excavating the various nodes and junctions, Beck remained restless and was eager to explore the utility of the concepts he had devised in real-world contexts (see Mythen, 2014; Guivant, 2016). As Sznajder (2015) observes, Beck's quest to lay bare the 'emergent properties' of the age mirrored the travails of the classical sociologists. This desire led him in the latter stages of his career to negate the idea of social change and to explore instead the elucidatory potential of *verwandlung* (metamorphosis). For Beck, this concept offered the prospect of excavating the distinctiveness of epochal processes and provided an opportunity to progress with a renewed interpretation of the relationship between social structures and human agency.

Lifting metamorphosis from its literary roots, Beck's last venture pays homage to Kafka's (1915) classic novella *Die Verwandlung*. The central protagonist in Kafka's tale is Gregor Samsa, a journeyman salesman who feels undervalued by his family and employer. Samsa awakes one morning from troubled dreams to find that he has metamorphosed into a giant insect. The remainder of the tale revolves around the responses of his relatives and colleagues to his plight. A century on from the publication of Kafka's novella, its allegorical aspects have been keenly contested, with sociological interpretations focusing on structural dysfunctionality and the reactions of individuals to social

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change (see Kelly, 2016). Following this cue, Beck's (2016: 189) intention in TMOTW was to elucidate the dramatic underlying transformations that were, in his view, remaking the world and to demonstrate the ways in which novel patterns of change were fostering new moral codes and renewed modes of sociality. There are also shades of the experience of Kafka's Samsa in the existential bewilderment Beck describes that arises from inhabiting a world in which taken for granted values and modes of operating become redundant. Analogous to Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, it is important to stress from the outset that TMOTW is open to ambivalent interpretation. Certain aspects of the thesis signify clear departures in Beck's thinking. Yet, there are continuities to be observed and clear bridges that allow routes of travel between the theory of metamorphosis and the world risk society thesis. Prior to offering a critical appraisal, it is first necessary to elaborate the main thrust of the argument and to highlight the core concepts that act as the working tools in the assembly of Beck's theory.

**Exegesis: Tracing the Contours of Metamorphosis**

Beck's (2016: 4) stated ambition in TMOTW was to travel beyond the theory of world risk society. In constructing the latter perspective, Beck had sought to render visible the impacts of the systemic production of risks, which he saw as intrinsic to capitalist development. In contrast, his last endeavor constitutes a more sanguine attempt to mark out the progressive political, social and environmental possibilities that emerge in the aftermath of modern crises. To this end, the theory of metamorphosis draws attention to the catalytic potential of potentially apocalyptic risks. Tracing parallels with the process of transformation from caterpillar to butterfly, Beck suggests that we are currently living in a cocoon state. Far-reaching transformations are taking place in the world

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3 as a result of environmental crisis, global conflicts and the development  
4 of genetic technologies - but we remain incognizant of the seismic  
5 impacts of these processes. In order to comprehend the metamorphosis of  
6 the world, Beck asserts that it is necessary to explore evidence of nascent  
7 processes and to grasp harbingers of structural transformations. Here the  
8 cocoon simile functions to signify a state of unawareness of impending  
9 transformation and the idea of transfiguration - rather than change - is  
10 embedded in the examples deployed, from IVF treatment to global  
11 financial crisis.  
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20 Echoing the pitch of *Risk Society* (1992) - first published in  
21 Germany over thirty years ago - TMOTW (2015) represents a clarion call  
22 that rings out at a series of levels. The decibels generated by Beck are  
23 designed to jangle the frequencies of a medley of folk: from social  
24 scientists, institutional practitioners and media professionals to party  
25 politicians, environmental campaigners and leftist activists. His appeal to  
26 reset the moral and political compass is staged in three parts. In the first  
27 section of the book the foundations of his new theory are elaborated. Here  
28 the focus is directed towards quantitating and qualifying the meaning of  
29 metamorphosis. Taking a more direct line of flight than that delineated in  
30 the world risk society thesis, the dramatic transformatory capacity of  
31 contemporary conflicts and crises are catalogued. Critical here is the  
32 deep-seated and catalyzing force of contemporary ruptures that denote  
33 not simple transitions, but, moreover, a process of metamorphosis. For  
34 Beck, the world is not undergoing a phase of transition from one period  
35 to the next - as inferred in various models of development - rather, it is  
36 metamorphosing: 'social change allows us to turn towards the same, but  
37 does not allow us to understand that we are becoming different' (Beck,  
38 2016: 77). Drawing on historical comparisons, Beck seeks to show that  
39 both the propelling pistons and the compass points of society have altered  
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dramatically, with metamorphosis being categorized as distinct from previous forms of societal change, such as political revolutions or colonial conquests: ‘it slinks in, as it were, through the back door of side effects’ (Beck, 2016: 48). Beck’s proposition here is that metamorphosis is fundamentally non-intentional and unaligned to particular ideological perspectives. Instead, it ‘takes hold of people’s daily lives inexorably, with an enormous acceleration that constantly outstrips existing possibilities of thought and action’ (Beck, 2016: 56). For Beck, a failure to harness and manage change has long exposed the ailing capability of the Nation State, with societal institutions being unable to cope with or regulate cross-boundary problems and issues. This signifies both a practical real-life conundrum to be grappled with at policy level and a methodological dilemma for the social sciences. While traditional social science theories of social change have focused on transitions and followed a stages model that assumes progression from one phase to another sharing similar characteristics, the world we are inhabiting presently leaves us in uncharted waters. Imploring the reader to accept that a paradigm shift is transpiring in front of our eyes, Beck seeks to establish clear blue water between the of potential metamorphosis and routine social change. Using the environment as a touchstone for debate, Beck believes that an unstinting focus in politics, the media and amongst scientists about whether climate change is actually occurring, masks the fact that the process has already produced sea changes, both literally and in terms of values and actions. In this way the physical process of climate change generates shifting patterns of risk distribution hasten the need to redraw geographical maps beyond the container of the Nation State in order to properly chart emerging landscapes of inequality. For Beck, the manifest effects of global warming and rising sea levels has led to both a redistribution of national and international inequalities and a process of

ecological enlightenment amongst the public (see Curto, 2016). The theory of metamorphosis thus constitutes an attempt to travel beyond world risk society. Rather than being about the negative side effects of 'goods', metamorphosis describes the positive side effects of 'bads' that reach beyond the national frame of reference and encourage a cosmopolitan outlook. With reference to a case study of the New York waterfront, Beck demonstrates the ways in which the redistribution of risks can engender normative horizons of common goods. Similarly, despite its catastrophic effects, Beck argues that the Hurricane Katrina environmental disaster produced forms of 'moral violation' that illuminated risk inequalities in the United States. In as much as it is questionable whether these cases of environmental risk have tangibly impacted on the redistribution of wealth or a leveling off of (in)security between different economic or ethnic groups, Beck seeks to emphasize the rising economic and political power of urban centres. Here he finds seeds of hope in civic liberation movements, arguing that co-operation between eco-friendly cities may transcend embedded conflicts of interest between nation-states.

Having laid down the central tenets of metamorphosis, in part two of the book Beck focuses on key themes, writing across different areas of analysis including class inequalities, (geo)political structures, global cities and digitalization. In this, the most expansive section of the book, Beck attempts to synthesize theory and practical examples, providing a conceptual tool-kit with which the metamorphosis can be tested. Citing various examples of 'emancipatory catastrophism', Beck traces the ways in which both manifesting crises and impending disasters foster critical social reflection capable of expanding collective moral horizons (Beck, 2016: 69; Blok, 2015: 110). Turning to the philosophy of Friedrich



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Nietzsche, Beck argues that high magnitude risks such as climate change promote an *Umwertung der Werte*, or a revaluation of all values.

Part three of TMOTW is comparatively brief and oriented toward a prognosis of future possibilities. It is here that the unfinished nature of the manuscript becomes tangible and it is probable that Beck had planned to attend to the final stages of his thesis post receiving reviews of the first draft. As it stands, the single chapter in this section - penned by Beck and edited by Anders Blok - is arguably the most novel section of the book. At this juncture, the experiences of ‘global risk generations’ are recounted with Beck depicting young people as proselytizing actors capable of vectoring metamorphosis toward progressive ends. A dual-pronged approach is adopted here, with Beck drawing attention to both the ‘generation of metamorphosis’ and the ‘metamorphosis of generations’ (Beck, 2016: 187). Drawing attention to inter-generational cleavages - typified by an inability to acknowledge that young people both operate in and conceive of the world in a discrete fashion - Beck describes the ‘metamorphosis of socialization’ through which the unique upbringing and lived experiences of young people can be appreciated. Recounting the impacts of risk, individualization and globalization on the ‘generation of side effects’, Beck sketches out the prospects for a cohort of young people who have grown up in a world in which national structures have failed to tackle global problems (Beck, 2016: 188). It is argued that a vital value shift is in train, whereby young people recognize the limitations of outmoded social forms and develop understandings of their place in the world and their possibilities for political action. Thus, the cultural landscapes and communicative practices of young people are described as fundamentally different from those of their forebears. For Beck, the rapidly fluctuating nature of communication technologies and the side effects that are routinely thrown up by the labile dynamics of



globalization are constitutive of a societal tidal turn: 'there are increasingly fields in which ... the younger generation turns into the teacher of the older, showing the elderly the way forward. They are the one's for whom the metamorphosis has become second nature, while the older generations experience it as a threat to their existence. The elderly were born as human beings but, as in Kafka's novel, woke up one morning as insects called the "digital illiterate". The young generations, on the contrary, were already born as "digital beings" ... the *Homo cosmopolitanicus* within world risk society are radically different. Already today the global risk generations are better interlinked across borders and more open to the world and its self-destructive potential' (Beck, 2016: 189-190). Despite the relative brevity of part three of the book, it is arguably here that Beck breaks into palpably fresh terrain and where acolytes might forage further in order to advance the theory of metamorphosis.

### **Travelling Beyond World Risk Society? Continuities and Departures**

Theory building around an established foundational framework has been a defining feature of Ulrich Beck's academic career (see Wilkinson, 2011; Woodman, Threadgold and Possamai-Inseedy, 2015). It is thus unsurprising that it was the groundbreaking risk society perspective that ultimately led Beck to the theory of metamorphosis. Rather than being considered as a standalone piece, TMOTW is arguably best appreciated as the culmination of Beck's attempts to capture the spirit of the zeitgeist. His thesis both draws across and relies upon the key concepts expounded over the course of the last three decades, most notably those of risk, individualization, globalization and cosmopolitanization. Further, the theme of societal confrontation implicit in the process of reflexive modernisation - as previously defined by Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994)

- remains integral. Indeed, the heightened intensity with which the consequences of economic, scientific and technological ‘development’ both destabilize and challenge societal foundations is relayed in relation to various examples, including the Fukuyama nuclear incident, the Edward Snowden case and the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Yet, alongside the continuities, there is tangible expansion in Beck’s train of thought, most notably in relation to the emancipatory potential of global risks. While the impacts of unintended ‘side effects’ are omnipresent throughout the book, Beck’s understanding of their political consequences and social ramifications is more distinctly defined. Whereas world risk society theory provides a weighty account of the negative side effects of the production of ‘goods’ intrinsic to capitalism (see Mythen, 2014; Urry, 2014), the theory of metamorphosis is designed to elucidate the positive side effects of bads. Correcting what he considered to be previous misinterpretations of his work, Beck (2016: 67) stresses that world risk society is not to be confused with a ‘catastrophe society’. On the contrary, ‘the constant threat of a growing array of local risks and mega hazards’ acts as an agent of metamorphosis, capable of vectoring positive political energies in growing ‘sub-political, sub-revolutionary spaces of action’ (Beck, 2016: 114). The dualistic properties of risk and opportunity associated with metamorphosis thus represent a marked shift in Beck’s thinking around social change. As customary, there are deliberate and tangible layers of ambiguity in the argument, as Beck projects a spectrum of futures, contingent on both institutional responses to crises and individual purposive actions (see Curran, 2018). Far from a linear journey towards utopia or dystopia, the theory of metamorphosis infers an indeterminate future, with Beck remaining ambivalent about the contours of the coming horizon: ‘for him, our movement towards future modernization is not towards progress or

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3 apocalypse, but rather something constitutively and forever in between’  
4 (Sznaider, 2015: 3). Inasmuch as Beck has always been attuned to the  
5 positive potential of bottom up sub-political engagement, in TMOTW he  
6 advances with much greater gusto the proposition that engagement with  
7 and dialogue about ‘bads’ can produce ‘common goods’. As indicated  
8 above, the primary illustration here is widespread acknowledgement of  
9 the deleterious impacts of economic and techno-scientific developments  
10 on the environment, in relation to people’s perspectives and institutional  
11 practices: ‘climate change is not climate change; it is at once much more  
12 and something very different. It is a reformation of modes of thought, of  
13 lifestyles and consumer habits, of law, economy, science and politics’  
14 (Beck, 2015a: 79).  
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17 *In toto*, TMOTW constitutes an attempt to grapple with the  
18 contours of a labile globalized world in which nation states consistently  
19 fail to manage trans-boundary risks and social institutions are outstripped  
20 by the pace of change. The theory of metamorphosis effectively rests on  
21 three interconnected transformative principles (Beck, 2016: 134). Firstly,  
22 ‘categorical metamorphosis’, which involves realization of the  
23 fundamentally distinct and novel nature of the transformations kindled by  
24 capitalism, global risk and individualization. Categorical metamorphosis  
25 engenders a particular way of seeing the world that involves recognizing  
26 the limits to dominant Western frameworks of knowledge production and  
27 analytically transcending them through the development of cosmopolitan  
28 modes of analysis which invite in and include previously excluded global  
29 others (Beck, 2016: 76). Secondly, Beck identifies forms of ‘institutional  
30 metamorphosis’ through which the incapacity of contemporary structures  
31 are acknowledged. Through institutional metamorphosis, social structures  
32 which have been ‘hollowed-out’ are compelled to adapt in order to meet  
33 the challenges of a labile globalized world. Thirdly, ‘normative  
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metamorphosis’, which involves both definitional struggles around risk and shifting sets of cultural and moral values. Through transformations in ideas, actions and practices, Beck avers that different ways of living and doing are emerging. As the three propositions suggest, Beck’s departing theory represents an attempt to connect risk consciousness to political action, with the coalescence of the three forms of metamorphosis promising the creation of normative horizons of ‘common goods’ (Beck, 2016: 133).

Amidst the conceptual advances in thought that accompany the theory of metamorphosis, hues of the risk society approach indubitably shade Beck’s final contribution. Cracks in the capitalist ideological fantasy of an economic system capable of providing health and security for all are once more writ large in his critique, with the destabilizing effects of the drive toward unfettered growth being narrated. Beck is again motivated to stress the globality of risk and the potentially catastrophic nature of the ‘side effects’ that render capitalism a ‘problem for itself’ (see Beck, 2016: 102; Mythen, 2018). Consistent with previous work, the universality of global risks - such as financial crisis, terrorism and environmental despoliation - are accented, as is the incapacity of nation state structures to effectively manage hazards that transcend national borders (Beck, 2016: 44). Building on earlier work on the ‘relations of definition’ (Beck, 1995), the significance of institutions in reproducing knowledge about social risks is focal to the metamorphosis thesis. Here we see a return to early work on the representation and perception of risk that preceded *Risk Society* (1992), with a more consistent emphasis being placed on the way in which threats are defined via engagement with various media and the impacts this has on ‘collective memory’ (Beck, 2016: 123). Repurposing the concept of ‘anthropological shock’ (Beck, 1987) for the modern age, attention is

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3 drawn to the mediation of specific tragedies - such as those arising out of  
4 war and conflict - that leave 'indelible marks' on the consciousness of  
5 populations (Beck, 2016: 122). It is argued by Beck that such iconic  
6 events not only inscribe cultural perceptions and memory, but also have  
7 the capacity to alter future outlooks. Following on from the experience of  
8 anthropological shocks, Beck reasons that a form of 'social catharsis' is  
9 commonplace. This process not only entails collective forms of  
10 mourning, but also active and critical reflection on erroneous institutional  
11 decisions.  
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20 Without doubt, TMOTW provides a more nuanced account of the  
21 role of the media in communicating risk than that exhibited in previous  
22 work, with the social significance of media platforms in the anticipation  
23 of catastrophe being foregrounded: 'global risks *per se* are invisible. It is  
24 only through mediated images that they acquire the power to break  
25 through this invisibility' (Beck, 2016: 127). Building on the refreshed  
26 appreciation of new technologies begun in *World at Risk* (2009), in  
27 TMOTW Beck (2016: 104) emphasizes the axial role of media in  
28 representing risk, particularly in situations of *nichtwissen* (not knowing).  
29 In instances of indeterminacy, the formation of an 'apocalyptic  
30 imaginary' in the media and public sphere is seen to serve as 'an affective  
31 prophylaxis', jolting institutions out of forms of 'organised  
32 irresponsibility' and forcing them to respond to the plight of those  
33 adversely impacted by the risks which others produce (Beck, 2016: 37).  
34 This renewed appreciation of the role of the media in informing and  
35 shaping understandings of risk acts as a soldering device, enabling Beck  
36 to connect together the conceptual strands of his thesis. The evolution of  
37 media technologies is seen to have opened up spaces of dialogue and  
38 advanced the prospects of political resistance capable of challenging the  
39 reproduction of social and environmental hazards: 'global risks are  
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3 turning into battlefields of visual globalization. It is not the catastrophic  
4 risks but the globalized images of these events that trigger the  
5 anthropological shock, which, filtered, channeled, dramatized or  
6 trivialized in the diversity of old and new media, can create a social  
7 catharsis and provide the normative framework for an ethics of “never  
8 again” (Beck, 2016: 127). Fashioning his argument around challenges to  
9 the ‘politics of invisibility’, Beck (2016: 127) emphasizes the positive  
10 capability of media and communication technologies in the advancement  
11 of a ‘global sub-politics of civil society movements’.

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20 Despite charting some of the possible routes toward future  
21 emancipation it would be wrong - and this may turn out to be a common  
22 misapprehension - to view metamorphosis as an intrinsically positive  
23 process. In keeping with Beck’s rendition of the multivalent possibilities  
24 of the risk society, the process of metamorphosis has the capacity to yield  
25 both deleterious and progressive outcomes. In as much as forms of  
26 metamorphosis have the capacity to galvanize new forms of co-operation  
27 and solidarity, they may exacerbate extant cleavages and foster new  
28 insecurities. Thus, the buoyant optimism of Beck’s political spirit is  
29 tempered in passages of agnosticism where the uncertainties of the future  
30 are laid bare: ‘Metamorphosis is very much open. Metamorphosis leaves  
31 wide gaps of not knowing. Something is changing basically (the frame of  
32 reference in reality and in framing reality), but this leaves wide gaps of  
33 not knowing’ (Beck, 2015: 77). It is the very indeterminacy of  
34 metamorphosis - and, moreover, its ramifications for the mutable  
35 dynamic between structure and human agency - that gives rise to a  
36 historical space in which the future is up for grabs: ‘Metamorphosis, as in  
37 the title of the Kafka story ... contains the meanings of magical  
38 transformation and a Gestalt shift. It does not describe a static condition,  
39 which then changes, but rather a constant shimmering in-between-ness. It

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3 is a structural process but, at the same time, the ever-changing result of  
4 interactive creative desire' (Sznajder, 2015: 2). Of course, the extent to  
5 which, in conditions of routine indeterminacy, people's interpretations of  
6 their own experiences and those of others are subject to transmutation  
7 remains an open question and one that Beck was keen to empirically  
8 investigate. Here, we see a return to familiar ground, with Beck asserting  
9 that it is the duty of academics to not only shine a light on unraveling  
10 world events, but also to address their profound social and political  
11 consequences.  
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### 20 21 **Position, Method and Trajectory: A Beckian Reprise?**

22 Thus far we have examined the conceptual assemblage which undergirds  
23 the theory of metamorphosis and scrutinized the prevalent themes  
24 through which Beck seeks to animate his thesis. It is now necessary to  
25 survey the broader trajectory of his academic mission and to broach  
26 questions of position and method. Alongside developing an  
27 understanding of how the theory of metamorphosis keys in with and  
28 extends the conceptual architecture of world risk society, it is important  
29 to consider the methodological tact taken by Beck and his  
30 epistemological location. It is here where the resonances and joins with  
31 previous forays become perceptible. Inasmuch as it is often difficult to  
32 untangle questions of approach, method and trajectory, for analytical  
33 purposes I wish to separate out - yet eventually reunify - Beck's style  
34 (provocative/disruptive), methodological framework (cosmopolitanism),  
35 approach (projective/thematic) and operational technique (*zeitdiagnose*).  
36 In as much as it is the articulation of these elements that distinguishes  
37 Beck's work from his peers, little has currently been written about his  
38 comparatively unconventional method, nor the significance of the  
39 interplay between the factors above.  
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First, in terms of scholarly *style*, the provocative pulse that resounds through Beck’s opus is palpable in TMOTW. Alongside calls for the modernization and reformation of institutions, Beck lambasts mainstream social sciences, maintaining that extant analytical frameworks cannot capture the indents made - nor the ramifications of - global processes currently shaping society and the lived environment: ‘we social scientists are at a loss for words in the face of the reality which is overrunning us’ (Beck, 2016: 69). An incapacity to adequately identify the nature of current social problems - allied to myopia in relation to the significance of contemporary transformations - indicates that a new social science syntax is required. In this regard, the redundancy of traditional units of sociological analysis - such as class and nation - are underscored in TMOTW, echoing his (Beck, 2000; 2005; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) controversial dismissal of ‘zombie categories’. In issuing a clarion call for the development of new theories and concepts, Beck’s prose in TMOTW is unequivocal and daring. The writing is typically bold, with the dark wit and *wortwitz* beloved by his followers lurking just beneath the surface (see Selchow, 2016: 370). In order to ‘see the newness of the world’, Beck (2015a: 78) reasons that social scientists must become open to self-critique and more receptive to engaging with real world problems and issues. Calling for the maturation of ‘a new public and scientific vocabulary’, Beck (2015a: 76) insists that social scientists must embrace ways of thinking that challenge canonical norms and embark on a sustained project of methodological reformation.

Second, Beck’s provocative style itself emanates from a particular ideational standpoint in relation to the production of knowledge. This connects firmly to his preferred *methodological framework* of cosmopolitanism. The epistemological stance adopted by Beck in previous work on risk, globalization and cosmopolitanization, propels the

theory of metamorphosis, with the unfolding breakdown of nation State institutions and political systems being seen as symptomatic of the limits to nation-centric modes of thinking. The ‘assumed naturalness of the social and political order’ (Beck, 2016: 145) is most palpably manifested in what Beck dubs the ‘Copernican Turn 2.0’, or the tendency to conceive of nation States as the fixed star around which the world rotates. In Beck’s view, narrow boundary limited policy-making is ineffectual in militating against risks which are inherently global in nature. Imploring the reader to accept the death of ‘methodological nationalism’, Beck (2016: 128) restates the case for a cosmopolitan methodological framework which, he claims, not only enables diagnostic purchase, but also enhances problem solving and the generation of new ways of organizing social relations. In contrast with the outmoded categories and concepts associated with methodological nationalism, following the cosmopolitan perspective, ‘the unit of research is a community of risk, which includes what is excluded in the national perspective: that is, the decision makers and the consequences of their decisions for others across time and space’ (Beck, 2015a: 76). Thus, at a methodological level, TMOTW represents a further attempt by the author to bring about a prototype shift in social science research away from the limited methodological nationalism of the twentieth century toward a methodological cosmopolitanism capable of grappling with the major problems and issues prescient in the twenty-first century. The key to forging a cosmopolitan solidarity for Beck lies in the transfiguration of thought. To this end, he urges the reader to put themselves in a headspace of thinking the unthinkable, which he believes is essential if the progressive aspects of metamorphosis are to be seized. *Ergo*, so far as ontology and epistemology are concerned, the theory of metamorphosis produces something of a methodological conundrum. Whilst Beck

challenges his audience to acknowledge the sweeping transformations reshaping the world, observing and appreciating such transformations requires the individual to undergo a form of personal metamorphosis (of being) in order to view and understand the world with fresh eyes (knowing). To appreciate the wide-ranging impacts of social metamorphosis and to promote the commonweal, the reformatory potential of risk must be realized. The social science conundrum writ large in Beck's thesis reads thus: the theorization of metamorphosis requires the metamorphosis of theorizing, yet, simultaneously, the metamorphosis of theorizing requires the theorization of metamorphosis. As formidable a task as this may seem, Beck is at pains to stress the everyday quality of metamorphosis which, for him, occurs habitually and routinely through everyday practices in a globalized world where cosmopolitanization is a lived reality rather than a lifestyle choice of privileged elites.

Third, the characteristic throwing down of the methodological gauntlet described above can be indexed to Beck's peculiar *approach*, which is again consistent with previous incursions. In as much as various examples are alighted on in TMOTW, Beck's intention is not to assiduously assemble statistical data, nor to offer comprehensive qualitative evidence. Despite having been widely criticized for his lack of attention to empirical detail (see Elliott, 2002; Ekberg, 2007; Mythen, 2004), Beck's resolution in this regard can be indexed to the projective nature of his endeavour and the thematic approach adopted. As he puts it in TMOTW: 'I am not concerned with the present in its totality, but what is new in our present reality' (Beck, 2015a: 19).

Despite seeking to place one foot down on the changing ground of the present and planting the other over the landscape of the future, it is fair to say that a duty of investigative empirical purpose inspired Beck in

the autumn of his academic career. In this regard, it would be disingenuous to depict Beck as an abstract theorist who sidestepped the messy business of mapping everyday realities. Indeed, in mobilizing the apparatus of methodological cosmopolitanism, it was his direction of grounded studies which motivated him to develop the theory of metamorphosis. In the final research project which he led - a major ERC funded project entitled 'In the Laboratory of Climate Change' - Beck sought to measure his theoretical assumptions against patterns and trends in various parts of the world. This venture was transnational in orientation and involved investigation of the impacts of environmental risks on social structures, human relationships and patterns of behavior (see Guivant, 2016; Mythen, Burgess and Wardman, 2018).

Fourth, in constructing the theory of metamorphosis, Beck (2016: 129) was motivated to further advance a time diagnostic *operational technique*. In contrast to providing pure descriptions of society, *zeitdiagnose* is chiefly concerned with identifying transformatory processes in order to speculate about the future shape of society (see Hammershøj, 2015: 140). This mode of diagnosis is rooted in the sociological canon, flowing from the foundational writing of Marx, de Tönnies, Durkheim and Weber, through the classical work of the Frankfurt School, to Beck's mentors and colleagues, such as Habermas and Giddens. The technique is consistent with Beck's promotion of 'projective social theory' and his overarching ambition to develop working tools and concepts fit for contemporary purposes. Having been erroneously characterized as overly abstract and prone to using universalizing discourse (see Bergkamp, 2017; Alexander and Smith, 1996), Beck was fully committed to offering a prognosis of the unique and nascent features of the contemporary world and this is epitomized in

his ambition to formulate critical social analysis underpinned by *zeitdiagnose* (see Beck, Holzer and Kieserling, 2001).

**Exploring Metamorphosis: Opportunities, Challenges and Limits**

Before bringing this article to a close, I wish to offer some critical reflections on the theory of metamorphosis, indexing these to Beck’s modus operandi and his broader intellectual odyssey. As discussed above, the theory of metamorphosis very much emerged out of Beck’s desire to drill down from the concepts he had developed through schematic theoretical analysis to the everyday impacts of ‘banal cosmopolitanism’ (see Sierakowski, 2015). For him, the process of cosmopolitanization - like risk distribution - was not so much governed by individual ‘opt in’. Rather, it constituted a modern way of being which was unceasing and unavoidable (see Zhang, 2018). Glocal lives and relationships were, for Beck, routine and quotidian for the majority of Western citizens. Moreover, cosmopolitan ways of being were not only reproductive, but, moreover transformative. As typified by Beck’s optimism regarding the catalytic political potential of younger generations, TMOTW is imbued with a strong sense of political purpose. Critical here is the iterative role of dialogue with others in producing progressive change: ‘there is no metamorphosis without communication: communication about metamorphosis is constitutive of metamorphosis’ (Beck, 2016: 126). Relative to preceding work, the book can be considered as a concerted attempt to induce action. In this regard, one of the most prominent aspects of the theory of metamorphosis is a desire to motivate the reader to express the autonomy necessary for political transformation and to engage in progressive emancipatory action. Thus, the cosmopolitan methodological framework discussed previously was not solely representative of an agnostic academic preference for Beck. Rather, it

served as an attempt to practically engage with the thorny issues so often skirted around in Sociology, such as ethics, morals and principles. Beck did not only strive to research the cosmopolitan turn, he also practised the core values that such a turn necessitates, such as solidarity, co-operation and trust.

Naturally, it is difficult to decisively appraise what is, in essence, an unfinished book using the traditional yardsticks of comprehensiveness, cohesiveness and evidence. Indubitably, the lingering ‘open questions, from metaphors of mysterious meaning to arguments based on unknown sources’, left those that took up the task of completing the book after Ulrich’s passing with an unenviable task (see Beck-Gernsheim, 2016: foreword). Notwithstanding, the impossibility of this task, the form of projective social theory which characterizes TMOTW somewhat negates measurement against the customary indices. That said, there are evident elisions in Beck’s thesis, areas which remain undeveloped and some overstated claims to boot. Side-stepping the tautology of the methodological conundrum alluded to earlier and, at the risk of slipping into the frame of methodological nationalism, there are areas in which the theory of metamorphosis can be unpicked. In raising a selection of points of critique, for illustrative purposes I wish to tether these to Beck’s archetypal example of metamorphosis, climate change. In probing the catalytic power of the new concepts that Beck has bequeathed us, it is worth considering the blocks and limits to the materialization of an emancipatory politics. Working through the example of climate change, it is possible to contest Beck’s view along various axes, including those of representation, power and political volition.

While Beck is keen to shine a light on the emancipatory spaces that emerge out of rising environmental awareness, his optimism at times causes him to overlook embedded structural factors that inhibit both

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institutional renewal and individual political autonomy. Questions of personal volition aside, the manipulation of both basic and beyond survival needs that characterizes capitalism, means that - even assuming inclination - few have the time, resources or energy to consistently campaign for change. While those in countries blighted by poverty may have little choice but to engage in practices that directly damage the environment in order to ensure their survival, many living in affluent countries are affected by the ‘value-action’ gap (see Mythen, 2014: 130). Due to a range of intervening factors - such as self and familial reproduction, financial pressures and short-term gains - changing environmental values do not always translate into either political mobilization or the greening of everyday practices. This aside, the distracting tendencies of consumer capitalism evoked in the classic work of the Frankfurt School have arguably moved to hyper-intense levels in the modern world. In as much as Beck expresses political hope for the ‘generation of metamorphosis’, the pressures that young people face are at least equally likely to encourage forms of retreat into individualism and practices of everyday narcissism. The potential that Beck identifies for politically progressive activity through media technologies, has to be tempered by acknowledgement of the individualizing and privatistic possibilities of both traditional and new media forms. Alongside ruptures in the transitional routes from school to employment and home-owning, the various forms of bubble gum for the mind that the Frankfurt School identified as encouraging political acquiescence back in the 1930s are now more firmly entrenched in popular and consumer culture. There is no shortage of examples to illustrate this trend from gaming technologies and mobile phone apps to reality TV shows, talent contests and house make-over programmes. Such distractions certainly do not in and of themselves stifle political awareness - for young people or other



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3 generational groups - but their normalization within culture is likely to  
4 have impacted on both cultural values, social aspirations and temporal  
5 frames for engagement.  
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8         Somewhat ironically, while Beck (2014) had previously conceded  
9 that his appreciation of the power of the media in the representation of  
10 risk was relatively undeveloped, there are sections in TMOTW in which  
11 his approach to the media arguably becomes overstated. For instance,  
12 Beck's claims about the role of media images in 'socially exploding'  
13 risks and nurturing a global public sphere are too mechanistic. Similarly  
14 his aspiration that the media may stimulate a 'new framework of ethics'  
15 seems decidedly upbeat. Beck is justified in augmenting his appreciation  
16 of the centrality of the media in both culture and politics, yet the  
17 relatively narrow ownership and control impacts markedly on the  
18 representation of risk, particularly in mainstream news media.  
19 Furthermore, forms of public engagement with various interactive media  
20 platforms are motivated by a plethora of interests. While on the one hand,  
21 social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* can indeed be  
22 vehicles for political contestation and debate, they are also channels  
23 through which avarice, malice and anger are filtered, not to mention the  
24 kind of large scale political manipulation associated with the Brexit vote  
25 in the UK or Donald Trump's election campaign in the United States.  
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28         Perhaps more inhibiting to the proselytizing capacity of emancipatory  
29 catastrophism, are the underlying power networks that constitute both  
30 capitalist and (formally) socialist economies. It is no coincidence that the  
31 current leaders of the 'superpower' States of Russia, China and the  
32 United States share common ground in their reluctance to concede that  
33 environmental changes are a consequence of modes of mass production  
34 and consumption. Thus, as appealing as the concept of 'emancipatory  
35 catastrophism' may be to left-leaning academics and activists, the  
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political economy elephant in the room looms large. While nationhood may well be outdated in an era of global threats, States remain powerful actors that both govern and are melded to public institutions. It is in the interests of States to facilitate economic growth in the private sector and partisan support of corporate interests often runs contrary to ecological equilibrium and justice (White, 2014). Of course, financial as well as scientific reasons underpin such skepticism about global warming. While Beck is correct that scientists who deny that climate change is happening find themselves in the minority - even allowing for the consciousness raising capacity of social catharsis in the public sphere - breaking down vested interests in powerful industries such as oil, gas, commerce and transport is likely to prove a grueling task. What is more, economic coalitions between these power blocks span across actors and institutions with ostensibly conflicting political values. Above and beyond the personal protection of wealth and privilege, if Beck is correct in his assumption that capitalism forms of social organization effectively run up against their own limits in terms of the production of destabilizing side effects, the metamorphosis that Beck promotes requires not only ideational commitment, but also some form of blueprint for radical restructuring that extends beyond profit oriented political systems and nation states. Beck is correct in his assumption that acceptance of living in the anthropocene requires a change in modes of production, politics and governance, yet the journey to this point remains oblique.

**Conclusion: Metamorphosis as an Imaginational Invitation**

In developing the theory of metamorphosis, Beck's aspiration was to reveal 'the hidden emancipatory side effect of global risk' (Beck, 2015a: 75). His final contribution presses social scientists to take heed of the ways in which global catastrophes harbor the potential to jolt society into

concerted political action. Underpinning this was a desire to uncover the ways in which moral engagement and political participation could facilitate harmonious modes of living in the future (see Sørensen and Christiansen, 2014; Wierviorka, 2016). It is arguably here where the true value and vibrancy of Beck's work lies. If we are able to embrace the theory of metamorphosis as an invitation to imagine, then a meaningful discussion that takes place on a plain of possibility can flourish. In contrast to the ideational conservatism and defensiveness that characterized the work of some of his peers, Beck saw his sociological quest as an organic, mutable project. He was always quick to acknowledge palpable flaws that others identified in his work and to modernize his arguments after encountering what he considered to be new and useful knowledge. His consciously disruptive approach was intended not only to capture epoch defining processes but also to advance fresh epistemological frameworks which he insisted were necessary to understand 'the new which is rolling over us' (Beck, 1992: 9). Given his grand ambition to capture both elements of the present and aspects of the coming future, it is unsurprising that Beck's method has been open to question. Three parts *querdenker* to one part *schriftsteller*, Beck was inured to receiving criticism and took this as a habitual part of academic life (see Selchow and Kaldor, 2015). Whilst the academic default button is, unfortunately, customarily set to repel criticism, Beck embraced it. Indeed, he was often to be found writing to his critics to express thanks for their engagement and reflections on his ideas. His ambition was to stimulate a refreshed sociological imagination by developing fresh concepts and new tools of analysis capable of grasping the changing nature of the world and the complexities of social change (Beck, 2014: 13; Pearce, 2016). While assiduous assembly of empirical data was never paramount on the priority list, Beck's vocation was purposive and

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practical and this is often neglected in less stringent analyses of his work. Beck strived to evidence and (re)define his theoretical assertions through grounded field studies (see Beck, 2015a; 2015b; Blok, 2015), seeking to test the ‘middle-range concepts’ that constitute the theory of metamorphosis, such as ‘public bads’, ‘cosmopolitan risk communities’ and ‘anthropological shock’. His hope was that scholars would take up the opportunity to develop ‘a theoretically informed, ambitious, historical diagnosis of the metamorphosis of the world ... that allows us to describe the epochal change in horizon that universalistic theories fail to recognize’ (Beck, 2016: 71). In his writing and lobbying he sought to inspire both thinking and doing. This emphasis on praxis is pronounced in TMOTW, with emancipatory progression being vitally contingent on purposive action. Ultimately, it was never Beck’s intention to develop static landmark theories. Rather he was motivated to try to understand social change and transformation through whatever lens necessary. This itself permits unlimited possibilities to deconstruct, reassemble and augment. If the world that Beck describes is in a state of pupation *en route* to metamorphosis or merely in transition remains a moot point. Similarly, whether the process of metamorphosis has the capacity to ‘alter the political order of the world’ (Beck, 2016b: 1) is an open question. Therein lies the invitation to explore with adventure that defines Beck’s legacy. As his final offering demonstrates, Beck was unstinting in his desire to not only capture but also to convey what he saw as the propelling motors of the *zeitgeist*. Over time, his sociological ambitions became more focused on testing the many concepts he had created in real world environments and encouraging the translation of theories into practice. To this end, Beck’s determined campaigning and his interventions in debates around nuclear power, the environment and European politics tangibly shaped policy-making. Aside from being the

most avuncular of human beings, Beck's catalytic academic contribution necessitates that he should be remembered not simply as a major theoretician of social change, but, moreover, an agent of metamorphosis.

For Peer Review

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